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Sergei Prozorov

BIOPOLITICS AND SOCIALISM: FOUCAULT, AGAMBEN, ESPOSITO

Biopolitics and Soviet Socialism: Reciprocal Blind-Spots

The problematic of biopolitics has become an increasingly influential research orientation in the social sciences, applied in a variety of disciplines to analyse the transformations in the rationalities of power over life in diverse spatio-temporal contexts. The two primary contexts for these studies have been liberalism, particularly post-World War II neoliberalism, and fascism, particularly German Nazism. What has been almost entirely missing is the third major political ideology of the 20th century, i.e. socialism, particularly in its Soviet version (for exceptions see Collier 2011; Hoffmann 2011). There have been numerous studies of the positive and productive orientation of neoliberal biopolitics that governs lives through the mobilization of the freedom of its subjects and the negative and destructive orientation of Nazi biopolitics that engages in paroxysmal violence in the name of the survival of the privileged race and ultimately threatens its very existence. Yet, the studies of biopolitics are all but silent about what was arguably the most ambitious project of the *positive* transformation of human lives, i.e. the creation of the 'New Soviet Person' as the emancipated subject of the socialist society, which at the same time unleashed the unprecedented *negativity* of terror against the very persons that were to be transformed.

The Soviet experience provides ample historical evidence of both the positive and negative aspects of biopolitics, its power to 'make live' and to 'let die' (Foucault 2003, 241). Nonetheless, the theoretical literature on biopolitics has largely ignored the Soviet experience, while the empirical research in Soviet and Russian Studies has, with very few exceptions (e.g. Groys and Hagemeister 2005), largely ignored the problematic of biopolitics. And yet, this disconnection has proven highly detrimental, not merely because Stalinism offers an abundance of empirical examples of the exercise of power over life in a wide variety of spheres (hygiene, sexuality, legality, dancing, diet), but, more importantly, because this experience helps us address the central problem, if not the aporia, of the theory of biopolitics. This aporia consists in the *relation* between the positive and negative aspects of biopolitics. As a project of the post-revolutionary positive transformation of all social life along the lines of Marxist-Leninist ideology, Stalinism epitomizes the assumptions of positive biopolitics about the amenability of the vital processes of populations to transformation by political power. The infamous slogans about the constitution of the 'New Soviet Person' and the 'Soviet people' as a new 'historical community of human beings' clearly indicate the positive, literally constructivist character of the Soviet biopolitical project. At the same time, the actual experience of the construction of socialism, from the terror and the organized famine of the Collectivization to the anti-Semitic purge initiated by the Doctors' Plot of 1953, has been remarkably violent, annihilating the very lives that were to be transformed into something new. Stalinism thus appears to be a case of an extremely productive or positive biopolitics that turned into an equally extreme thanatopolitics. It is precisely this extremity,

whereby the *paradox* that arguably characterizes *all* biopolitics collapses into a *paroxysm*, that makes the case of Stalinism indispensable for understanding the potentiality for violence immanent to biopolitics as well as the limits that restrain this potentiality within various modes of biopolitical government.

The justification for addressing the specificity of Stalinist biopolitics seems to be established clearly. Yet, since this justification is evident for anyone with a minimal knowledge of Soviet history, there remains a puzzle of why the key theorists of biopolitics either ignored the Soviet experience or subsumed it under Western rationalities. In this chapter we shall address the slim dossier of the remarks on Soviet biopolitics by the three authors most associated with this problematic: Foucault, Agamben and Esposito. We shall address the way socialism in these three accounts is either subsumed under the Western experience or removed from the account of biopolitics. We shall conclude by arguing that the renewed engagement with socialist biopolitics does not merely set the historical record straight but also permits us to understand the ontological foundations of biopolitics as such.

The Absence of Socialist Governmentality

Since Foucault never addressed Russian or Soviet politics in any detailed manner, the textual corpus of his writings on this case is necessarily scant, composed of brief forays in books, digressions in lectures, casual asides in interviews, etc. Yet, it is in no way incoherent, since, as we shall show, Foucault practiced the same move of the subsumption of the Soviet experience under Western rationalities of government in a variety of contexts during the 1970s: from aesthetics to labour relations, from psychiatry to concentration camps.

Although Foucault's work on biopolitics only addresses issues of Stalinism and Soviet politics peripherally, it was clearly influenced by the events related to them. As Jan Plamper (2002) argued in a definitive analysis of the theme of the Gulag in Foucault's work, Foucault's genealogical turn towards the questions of power and government in the early and mid-1970s unfolded in the political context dominated by the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in French in 1974. It was this publication that accelerated the drift of French intellectuals, including Foucault, away from Marxism, and contributed to the rise of the 'anti-totalitarian' new philosophers (Bernard-Henry Levy, Andre Glucksmann et al), whom Foucault briefly supported. Moreover, the revelations about the Gulag in Solzhenitsyn's work led to the increased attention in France to the dissident movement in the USSR and Eastern Europe, which Foucault actively supported throughout the 1970s and whose struggle for freedom of speech arguably influenced his turn toward the problematic of *parrhesia* in the lectures of the 1980s (Foucault 2011).

Nonetheless, despite its significance in the French intellectual-political context at the time, the Soviet case does not figure prominently in Foucault's analysis of biopolitics. The simplest explanation for this absence would be Foucault's proverbial Eurocentrism, discussed by numerous critics since the famous comment by Edward Said (1988, 9-10): 'his Eurocentrism was almost total, as if history itself took place only among a group of French and German thinkers.' And yet, such an explanation would be far too simple, since Foucault actually *did* discuss the Soviet Union in quite a number of articles, lectures and interviews of the 1970s. These texts suggest that the reason why Foucault did not analyse Soviet socialism as a specific case of biopolitics or governmentality was not his lack of interest in non-European history but rather his conviction that there was little about

the Soviet case that was specific, idiosyncratic or unique. For Foucault, Soviet socialism was rather characterized by a puzzling persistence of the governmental technologies invented in late-18th and 19th century Europe. Whereas on the macro-level of state ideology and socioeconomic system the USSR obviously renounced Western capitalism, on the micro-level of disciplinary and biopolitical practices it continued to follow its techniques. As early as 1971, Foucault argued that the Soviet Union 'adopted almost entirely the bourgeois value system. One gets the impression that communism in its traditional form suffers from a birth trauma: you would think that it wants to recapture for itself the world at the time it was born, the world of a triumphant bourgeoisie; communist aesthetics is realism in the style of the nineteenth century: Swan Lake, painting which tells a story, the social novel. Most of the bourgeois values are accepted and maintained by the Communist Party (in art, the family, sexuality, and daily life in general).' (Foucault in Simon 1971, 196)

In Foucault's view, despite the evident break with capitalist Europe in socioeconomic terms, the Soviet techniques of government were borrowed directly from its ideological antagonist, the only autochthonous addition being that of 'party discipline', whose genealogy has indeed been traced to the practices of Orthodox Christian communities (see Kharkhordin 1999).

[It] is undoubtedly true that the Soviets, while having modified the regime of ownership and the state's role in the control of production, for the rest have simply transferred the techniques of administration and power implemented in capitalist Europe of the 19th century. The types of morality, forms of aesthetics, disciplinary methods, everything that was effectively working in bourgeois society already around 1850 has moved *en bloc* into the Soviet regime. Just as the Soviets have used Taylorism and other methods of management experimented in the West, they have adopted our disciplinary techniques, adding to our arsenal another arm – party discipline. (Foucault 1994a, 64)

From this perspective, even the phenomenon of the Gulag, the paradigmatic site of Soviet biopolitics, appears as merely one more in the arsenal of governmental techniques borrowed by the Soviet regime from its ideological adversaries (see Engelstein 1993). Indeed, so strong is the affinity that Solzhenitsyn's metaphor of 'archipelago', applied to the network of Soviet labour camps, was transferred by Foucault (back) to the French context as a key concept in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977, 301; see also Foucault 1980, 68). Foucault famously accounted for the birth of the Gulag with the help of the anecdote about a French criminologist Leveille advising the Russian government in 1892 to confine mental patients in Siberia: '[Good] old Leveille had defined the Gulag. Deportation to Siberia already existed but I believe it must have functioned quite simply as exile for political prisoners. The idea that there could be set up there a politico-medical – politico-penal-medical, or medico-politico-penal – confinement, with an economic function, which would allow the exploitation of the wealth of a still virgin country, that, I think, was a new idea.' (Foucault 1988a, 181-182. See Plamper 2002, 269-270 for a critique) In this manner, the Gulag is inserted into the European genealogy of power relations as the 'intensification' of the logic already at work in 19th century European governmentality (ibid., 181). The grand opposition between liberal democracy and totalitarianism is thus rendered inoperative on the level of governmental rationality: 'After all, the organization of great parties, the development of political apparatuses, and the existence of the techniques of repression such as the camps - all that is quite clearly the heritage of liberal Western societies, and all Stalinism and fascism had to do was to stoop down and pick it up.' (Foucault 1994b, 535). The Soviet experience is governmentally

identical to the West despite being ideologically distinct from it and, given Foucault's interest in governmentality and a certain disdain for ideology, it is hardly surprising that the identity ended up more important than the difference.

Biopolitics, Racism and Class Struggle

Let us now turn to Foucault's more extensive discussion of Soviet socialism from a biopolitical perspective in his 1975-1976 lecture course 'Society Must Be Defended'. In this course Foucault addressed the biopolitical rationality of government in terms of the logic of racism, which warranted the exclusion and ultimately the extermination of the categories of the population that were deemed other to the race in question. The theme of racism was also central to the best-known analysis of biopolitics in the first volume of *History of Sexuality* (1990), published in 1976. In the subsequent lectures at the Collège de France (1977-1978, 1978-1979) this theme all but disappeared, while the concept of biopolitics became rather less accentuated. In *Security, Territory and Population* (2007) Foucault abandoned the perspective of the modern shift from sovereign to bio-power in favour of a more extended genealogy of government from early Christianity through the Reformation to the 17th century doctrine of the *raison d'état* and 18th century 'police science'. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) the term reappeared in the title, but hardly anywhere else, as Foucault concentrated on the analysis of liberal government as the 'basis on which something like biopolitics could be formed' (ibid., 21), while repeatedly apologizing for deferring the discussion of biopolitics itself, which never actually came, since the concept disappeared entirely from Foucault's writings after these lectures (ibid., 78, 185). 'One would be incredibly hard-pressed to find in *The Birth of Biopolitics* anything remotely akin to a sustained analysis of biopolitics.' (Hoffmann, 2014: 57) Thus, the final chapter of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* and 'Society Must be Defended' remain the texts where the problematic of biopolitics is treated in the most elaborate way.

In *History of Sexuality I* Foucault uses the concept of racism to refer to Nazi regime as the articulation of the sovereign 'symbolics of blood' and the 'analytics of sexuality' associated with the rise of bio-power (Foucault 1990, 149-150). Foucault rejects any approach to Nazism as an abominable exception to the Western political tradition and instead treats it as a 'demonic' synthesis of sovereign and biopolitical techniques of government already operative in Western societies (Foucault 1988b, 71). The biopolitical logic of racism not only permits sovereign violence to survive in the climate hostile to it, but fortifies this violence by investing it with a wholly new function, no longer negative and repressive but rather oriented toward the preservation and improvement of the life of some races by annihilating the lives of the others, which pose a threat to it.

[Racism] is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. Its role is to allow the establishment of a positive relation of this type: 'the very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more'. The enemies who have to be done away with are not adversaries in the political sense of the term; they are threats, either external or internal, to the population and for the population. In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable. Once the state functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the state. (Foucault 2003, 255-256)

Racism is what permits the state to exercise its sovereignty by enfolded it in the biopolitical context, in which killing is only legitimate when it serves to enhance the survival and health of one's own race. Thus, the indistinction between the biopolitical preoccupation with fostering life and the thanato-political drive for annihilation that we observe in Nazism stops being paradoxical and is graspable as an expression of the logic of racism, according to which the life of any race is fostered by its purification from other races, which 'implies both the systematic genocide of others and the risk of exposing oneself to a total sacrifice' (Foucault 1990,149-150).

In the final lectures of *'Society Must Be Defended'* Foucault extends this account of racism to socialism, going beyond mere empirical claims about the reliance of socialist governmentality on the techniques developed during the rise of bio-power in 18th and 19th century Europe. Socialism is now also racist in the much more fundamental sense: 'Socialism was a racism from the outset, even in the nineteenth century. No matter whether it was Fourier at the beginning of the century or the anarchists at the end of it, you will always find a racist component in socialism.' (Foucault 2003, 261) This is the case for two reasons. Firstly, socialism has 'made no critique of the theme of biopower' and instead has taken over 'wholesale' the fundamental idea of modern biopolitics 'that the essential function of society or the State is to take control of life, to manage it, to compensate for its aleatory nature, to explore and reduce biological accidents and possibilities' (ibid., 261). This means that as soon as a socialist state comes to existence, it is a state 'which must exercise the right to kill or the right to eliminate, or the right to disqualify', [hence] 'racism is fully operational in the way socialist states (of the Soviet Union type) deal with the mentally ill, criminals, political adversaries, and so on' (ibid., 262). Secondly, socialism is racist due to its emphasis on class struggle and the physical confrontation with the enemy, racism being the 'only way in which socialist thought, which is after all very much bound up with the themes of biopower, can rationalize the murder of its enemies. When it is simply a matter of eliminating an adversary in economic terms, or of taking away his privileges, there is no need for racism. Once it is a matter of coming to terms with the thought of a one-on-one encounter with the adversary, and with the need to fight him physically, to risk one's own life and to try to kill him, there is a need for racism.' (Ibid., 262) While in the late 19th century French context racism primarily characterized non-Marxist versions of socialism (Blanquism, anarchism, etc.) rather than strictly Marxist ones (both reformist and revolutionary), in the 20th century it pertains primarily to the Soviet type of socialism, including the Stalinist and post-Stalinist USSR. Thus, in Foucault's argument, the only biopolitical specificity that Soviet socialism possesses consists precisely in the *absence* of any specificity, in the paradoxical and deplorable fact that for all its ideological heterogeneity to capitalist Europe it continued to rely on the biopolitical rationalities and techniques developed in it.

Is There a Revolutionary Biopolitics?

Foucault's use of the concept of racism oscillates ambiguously between its literal sense, when referring to Nazism and the colonial violence of Western liberal states, and a figurative or metaphorical usage with regard to both the domestic politics of the liberal states and Soviet governmentality. In the latter case the metaphorical usage is based on the apparent similarity between the discourse of class struggle with its figure of 'class enemy' and the discourse of the struggle for the protection of the race with its correlate figure of the racial enemy: 'In Soviet State racism, what revolutionary discourse designated as the class enemy becomes *a sort of* biological threat. So, who is the class enemy now? Well, it's the sick, the deviant, the madman. As a result,

the weapon that was once used in the struggle against the class enemy is now wielded by a medical police, which eliminates class enemies *as though* they were racial enemies.’ (Foucault, 2003: 83. Emphasis added.). Yet, is this ‘as though’ justified: was the class enemy really ‘a sort of’ biological threat? After all, a principled rejection of racism even in its quasi-scientific eugenic guise was a permanent feature of the official Soviet discourse (Hoffmann 2011, 105; Weiner 1999, 1123, 1146-7). While there are evident limits to taking the official proclamations of the Soviet discourse at face value, its hostility to racism was arguably not hypocritical and arose out of the ideological orientation that asserted the possibility and desirability of the transformation of human nature, which logically made any naturalist essentialism the ‘natural’ enemy of socialism. ‘Soviet power demonstrated permanently and on different levels of its political and economic practice a deep, almost instinctive aversion toward everything natural. The campaigns against genetics and psychoanalysis are as characteristic in this respect as the collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s, aimed at uprooting the peasants and severing their traditional, intimate attachment to the earth.’ (Groys 2011, 122. See also Dobrenko 2007, 75-82)

The Stalinist ‘Second Revolution’ that received the apt name ‘the Great Break’ (1928-1932) was the attempt to overcome the traditional forms of life sedimented as quasi-natural and thereby endow socialism with a real existence as a positive form of life. The Great Break was a three-pronged assault on the traditional forms of life: the forced industrialization that wiped out the remnants of private industry and trade and produced, literally from scratch, new industrial complexes and cities; the collectivization of agriculture that eliminated private farming and forced the rural population into state-owned collective farms; the ‘cultural revolution’ that sought to produce a new proletarian intelligentsia to replace ‘bourgeois specialists’ in industry, science and art. All three processes were marked by radical social dislocations and extreme governmental violence, well summed up in the claim of Stalin’s close ally Lazar Kaganovich that the Great Break consists in the ‘radical destruction of all socio-economic relations, accompanied by a technical revolution, and not the other way round.’ (Kaganovich cited in Priestland 2007, 207)

This is why Soviet socialism was from the outset radically heterogeneous to the protective, securitarian or ‘immunitary’ orientation that defined Western biopolitics in its ‘racist’ inflection (Foucault 2007, 8-49; Esposito 2011, 112-143). Since the object of socialist biopolitics was not life as it *was* but life as it must *become*, Stalinism did not valorize any aspect of the existing reality (be it economic exchange as in liberalism or racial vitality as in Nazism) but rather cast the existing forms of life as ‘obsolete’ and ‘dying’ – the favoured tropes of Soviet discourse of the period (see Dobrenko 2007, 101-124, 313-327). It is from this perspective that the difference of class enemy from the racial enemy becomes clear. Even when class enemies (e.g. the representatives of the aristocracy, bourgeoisie or the clergy) were cast in the official discourse as unproductive ‘parasites’, ‘vermin’ or ‘filth’ that could only corrupt the victorious proletariat and hence had to be excluded from the emerging polity through the deprivation of political rights, exile or incarceration, this exclusion did not operate in strict accordance with the naturalist and evolutionary logic of racism. The task of the socialist revolution was not the *protection* (of the race, nation, state, etc.) against the threat of the external or internal other but the *transformation* of society, which would abolish the existing hierarchies and distinctions between the self and the other. While the racist logic protects the given self against the threat of the other, the logic of class struggle attacks the given self in the name of the otherness that it must *become*. This is why the dominant trope of the Great Break was ‘reforging’, the transformation of human beings into ‘new Soviet persons’, and the Gulag camp was the prime site for such reforging, proudly publicized by the Soviet government in the late 1920s-early 1930s as the space where the class enemy is

transformed into the hero of socialist construction (see Barnes 2011). Although the violent character of such reforging is evident, its very possibility was by definition denied to the racial enemy, which makes the metaphoric transfer of the term to the discourse of class struggle highly problematic.

Yet, in addition to being historically unwarranted, Foucault's move is also problematic from his own theoretical perspective that leads him to the identification of biopolitics and racism in the first place. Foucault's genealogy of racism in *'Society Must Be Defended'* left open an alternative possibility of conceiving socialist biopolitics as autonomous. In these lectures Foucault reconstitutes what he calls a 'historico-political discourse' of race struggle that functioned since the 17th century as the alternative to the more familiar discourses of political philosophy, focused on the problem of sovereignty. In contrast to this abstract, ahistorical and impartial discourse, epitomized by Hobbes, the alternative discourse, whose emergence Foucault traces in the 17th century England (Edward Coke, John Lillburne) and early 18th century France (Henri de Boullainvilliers), is historical through and through, arising within a particular struggle and taking up a partisan position in it (Foucault 2003, 268-271). Rather than represent society as a unity held together by the sovereign, this discourse cast society as always already *binary*, structured in terms of the antagonism between those in power and those lacking it, '[them] and us, the unjust and the just, the masters and those who must obey them, the rich and the poor, those who invade lands and those who tremble before them, the despots and the groaning people.' (Ibid., 74)

This antagonism was framed in terms of the struggle of two so-called 'races' within a society. It is important to note that the concept of 'race' in this discourse was not, in Foucault's reading, pinned to any 'stable biological meaning' (ibid., 77) but rather designated a 'historico-political divide' between two groups in a society that did not share the same language or religion and only formed a united polity as a result of the conquest or subjugation of one by the other: 'two races exist when there are two groups, which, although they coexist, have not become mixed because of the differences, dissymmetries and barriers created by privileges, customs and rights, the distribution of wealth, or the way in which power is exercised.' (Ibid.) In contrast to the fictitious 'war of all against all' posited by Hobbes as the precondition for the institution of sovereign power, the counter-historical discourse posited real instances of war, e.g. the Norman conquest, as the actual foundation of state power and the real conflict between the conquerors and the conquered as the true substance of politics and history. We are evidently a long way from the modern notion of racism – if anything, the function of the counter-historical discourse in its original formulation in the English radicalism of the 17th century is closer to what we would today call a 'revolutionary' discourse of emancipation.

Indeed, in Foucault's own genealogy, this counter-historical discourse served as one of the precursors of the explicit revolutionary discourse in 18th century France and beyond:

What could the revolutionary project and the revolutionary idea possibly mean without this preliminary interpretation of the dissymmetries, the disequilibriums, the injustice and the violence that function despite the order of laws, beneath the order of laws, and through and because of the order of laws? Where would the revolutionary project, the revolutionary idea, or revolutionary practice be without the will to rekindle the real war that once went on and which is still going on? What would the revolutionary project and revolutionary discourse mean if the goal were not a certain, a final, inversion of relations of power and a decisive displacement within the exercise of power? (Ibid., 78-79)

During the 19th century the counter-historical discourse split into two tendencies, the 'properly revolutionary' discourse of class struggle that maintained the historical orientation of the earlier discourse but replaced its 'races' with socioeconomically defined classes, and the 'properly racist' discourse, which replaced the historical approach with the quasi-scientific, biological and evolutionary one, thus recoding the historical war as the struggle of the race for existence. While the discourse of class struggle maintained its predecessor's function of *undermining* the stability of the state form, recovering and reactivating the historical war and the 'binary society' that gave rise to it, the racist, biologico-medical discourse began to serve the contrary function of the *stabilization* of social order, recasting the binary society as a monistic one, which was nonetheless threatened by heterogeneous elements that must be eradicated for the life of the race to be secure. As a result of this recasting, the state, which for the early counter-historical discourse was an instrument of the oppression of one race by another, becomes the 'protector of the integrity, the superiority and the purity of the race. The idea of racial purity, with all its monistic, Statist and biological implications: that is what replaces the idea of race struggle.' (Ibid., 81) In this manner, counter-history ends up reclaimed by the traditional history of sovereignty and the *proto*-revolutionary discourse is converted into the *anti*-revolutionary discourse of state racism:

Racism is, quite literally, revolutionary discourse in an inverted form. Whereas the discourse of races, of the struggle between races, was a weapon to be used against the historico-political discourse of Roman sovereignty, the discourse of race (in the singular) was a way of turning that weapon against those who had forged it, of using it to preserve the sovereignty of the State, a sovereignty whose lustre and vigour were no longer guaranteed by magico-juridical rituals but by medico-normalizing techniques. Thanks to the shift from law to norm, from races in the plural to race in the singular, from the emancipatory project to a concern with purity, sovereignty was able to invest or take over the discourse of race struggle and reutilize it for its own strategy. State sovereignty thus becomes the imperative to protect the race. It becomes both an alternative to and a way of blocking the call for revolution that derived from the old discourse of struggles, interpretations, demands and promises. (Ibid., 82)

Thus, the original discourse of the struggle of the races ends up split into the revolutionary discourse of struggle (without races) and the 'neo-Roman' counter-revolutionary discourse of the protection of the race. This split clearly suggests the possibility of two distinct forms of biopolitics correlative with these two strands: the biopolitics of class struggle (socialism) and the biopolitics of racism (Nazism). Instead, Foucault immediately effaces this difference by subsuming the former under the latter as its metaphorical version. While the Nazi discourse reinserts the biological logic of state racism into the mythical and archaic context of the war of the races, in the Soviet discourse the insertion of the theme of class struggle into the biopolitical context allegedly produces a quasi-scientific, medico-psychiatric interpretation of racism. What was at first constructed as an *alternative* to racism, whereby history was grasped as the conflict of classes without a racial dimension to it, somehow becomes a *form* of racism, apparently all the more insidious because there was no actual reference to race in it.

[Soviet racism] consists in reworking the revolutionary discourse of social struggles – the very discourse that derived so many of its elements from the old discourse of the race struggle – and articulating it with the management and the policing that ensure the hygiene of an orderly society. And the hoarse songs of the races that clashed in

battles over the lies of laws and kings, and which were after all the earliest form of revolutionary discourse, become the administrative prose of a State that defends itself in the name of social heritage that has to be kept pure. (Ibid., 83)

The question that has not been but can be raised within the Foucauldian genealogical framework is whether biopower must exclusively latch onto the state racism, which is only one descendant of the counter-historical discourse of race struggle or whether it may also be exercised on the basis of the second descendant, i.e. the discourse of class struggle. After all, if racism was the 'inversion' of revolutionary discourse, what is the biopolitical content of that which it inverted? While, as we have seen, Foucault found the absence of an autonomous governmentality and biopolitics in socialism its key problem, explaining its internal contradictions and paroxysmal violence, this perception may well be the effect of a prior closure of biopolitics within the horizon of racism. Having excluded the possibility of a revolutionary biopolitics grounded in class struggle, one can either conclude that socialism lacks a biopolitical rationality as such or that it shares the rationality of racism with its ideological antagonists. Both conclusions are unhelpful for grasping the Soviet project and the governmental violence that accompanied it, the former effacing the specificity of this violence, irreducible to the traditional sovereign power of death, and the latter putting the blame for it on the rationality that was quite peripheral to this project.

Agamben and the Inner Solidarity of Totalitarianism and Democracy

The elision of the question of the biopolitics of socialism continues in the arguably most influential post-Foucauldian theory of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series. The absence of any engagement with socialism in Agamben's work is much easier to understand than in Foucault's case: while Foucault posited the emergence of biopolitical rationalities of government as a historical event marking the 'threshold of modernity', Agamben argues that biopolitics is, firstly, at least as old as sovereign power, and, secondly, coextensive with rather than opposed to it: 'the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.* In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as sovereign power.' (Agamben 1998, 6. Emphasis original.)

While Foucault was primarily interested in the positive difference of modern rationalities of government from sovereign modes of rule, what interests Agamben in the problematic of biopolitics is the overall constellation whereby life is captured in political rationalities, the constellation that has evidently been there long before Western liberalism, the appearance of statistics, the invention of the population and other categories that were relevant for Foucault's historical account. In Agamben's argument, the relation between unqualified life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) strictly parallels the relation between natural sound (*phone*) and articulated language (*logos*): the former functions as the negative foundation of the latter, whose exclusion, domination or subjugation permits the constitution of a determinate form of language or order: 'The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it.' (Agamben 1998, 8) Biopolitics is then *ipso facto* as old as human language. The critics that accuse Agamben of 'dehistoricization' are therefore ultimately incorrect: what Agamben traces is indeed a historical event, albeit the one that took place long before European modernity or, for that matter, the

Greek polis, but could be dated back to forty millennia ago (Agamben 2007, 9), i.e. the emergence of the human being as a speaking being.

Evidently, if one adopts this perspective, then the differences between liberalism and socialism (or, for that matter, liberalism and Nazism) would appear to be so minor as to become almost invisible. And yet, Agamben's argument does not assert the utter immutability of the biopolitical logic throughout the history of political orders. While biopolitics is indeed as old as human history, something important still happens with the advent of modernity, which is the horizon within which both Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism become possible. For Agamben modernity is a condition of *nihilism*, in which the devaluation of all positive forms of life (*bios*) leaves disconcealed the foundational status of *zoe* as the negative foundation of the political order and the sole possible object of political power. Given the bankruptcy of all positive forms of life, 'the only task that still seems to retain some seriousness is the assumption of the burden of biological life, that is, of the very animality of man.' (Agamben 2004, 76-77). In modern nihilism *bios* and *zoe* are no longer separated as the positive (qualified) and the negative (unqualified) senses of life but are rather rendered *indistinct* in the manifestation of the negativity at the heart of every positivity.

What characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of *zoe* in the polis, which is, in itself, absolutely ancient – nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of state power. Instead, the decisive fact is that the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. (Agamben 1998: 9)

It is from this perspective that we should approach Agamben's controversial remarks about the 'inner solidarity of democracy and totalitarianism' in *Homo Sacer* (1998, 10). Totalitarianism does not exemplify the transformation or deformation of the biopolitical logic but rather its most extreme manifestation, whereby bare life as the object of sovereign power is no longer concealed under the veneer of the positive forms of good life but is revealed as such. 'Only because politics in our age has been entirely transformed into biopolitics was it possible for politics to be constituted as totalitarian politics to a degree hitherto unknown.' (Agamben 1998, 120) Totalitarianism is therefore not a relapse of modern politics into a pre-modern or archaic violence but rather the most thoroughgoing expression of the nihilistic tendency at the heart of modernity itself: 'The totalitarianism of our century has its ground in this dynamic identity of life and politics, without which it remains incomprehensible. If Nazism still appears to us as an enigma, and if its affinity with Stalinism is still unexplained, this is because we have failed to situate the totalitarian phenomenon in its entirety in the horizon of biopolitics.' (Agamben 1998, 148)

Yet, what happens when totalitarianism is indeed situated in the biopolitical horizon? Agamben's response to this question has been rather ambivalent, oscillating between the maintenance of the difference between democracy and totalitarianism as distinct modes of biopolitics and the cancellation of this difference in the argument for their 'indistinction':

[The] contiguity between mass democracy and totalitarian states does not have the form of a sudden transformation; before impetuously coming to light in our century, the river of biopolitics that gave *homo sacer* his life runs its course in a hidden but

continuous fashion. One and the same affirmation of bare life leads, in bourgeois democracy, to a primacy of the private over the public and of individual liberties over collective obligations and yet becomes in totalitarian states, the decisive political criterion and the exemplary realm of sovereign decisions. And only because biological life and its needs had become the politically decisive fact is it possible to understand the otherwise incomprehensible rapidity with which 20th century parliamentary democracies were able to turn into totalitarian states and with which this century's totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies. Once their fundamental referent becomes bare life, traditional political distinctions (such as those between Right and Left, liberalism and totalitarianism, private and public) lose their clarity and intelligibility and enter into a zone of indistinction. (Ibid., 121-122)

On the one hand, democracy and totalitarianism remain distinct and it is possible to separate, and presumably oppose, the declarations of human rights to racist policies of exclusion or extermination. In this case, we might speak of the *proximity* of the two on the basis of their shared biopolitical foundation, but not really of their indistinction. The history of modernity is then *double-sided* in the strict sense that it is possible to identify two distinct sides to it, i.e. the progressive emancipation of bare life and its subjection to governmental rationalities. On the other hand, Agamben leans towards a stronger and more controversial claim that brings democracy and totalitarianism so close together in an 'inner solidarity' (cf. Agamben 1998, 10) that they become indistinct. In *Homo Sacer* this claim is presented in a brief and elliptic manner that calls for interpretation:

Democracy, at the very moment in which it seemed to have finally triumphed over its adversaries and reached its greatest height, proved itself incapable of saving *zoe*, to whose happiness it had dedicated all its efforts, from unprecedented ruin. Modern democracy's decadence and gradual convergence with totalitarian states in post-democratic spectacular societies, which begins to become evident with Alexis de Tocqueville and finds its final sanction in the analyses of Guy Debord, may well be rooted in this aporia, which marks the beginning of modern democracy and forces it into complicity with its most implacable enemy. (Agamben 1998, 10)

In this statement, the inner solidarity of democracy and totalitarianism is not so much a matter of their underlying identity, but rather a result of the *degradation* of democracy. Yet, this degradation is itself rooted in the originary aporia of modern democracy, which, in contrast to classical democracy that was founded on the exclusion of *zoe* from *bios*, 'wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place – 'bare life' – that marked their subjection.' (Ibid., 9-10) Totalitarianism appears to be the direction of democracy's degraded development, which in turn is determined by its constitutive flaw, at least in its modern version.

While the examples of the collapse of democracies into totalitarianism in the 20th century are all too familiar, Agamben's scandalous invocation of 'inner solidarity' between the two regimes is not merely grounded in the familiar historical evidence of the fragility of democratic institutions (i.e. it is not a 'historiographical claim') (1998, 10) but arises from Agamben's interpretation of both regimes as instances of modern nihilism. What ultimately accounts for the intimate solidarity of the two regimes is the condition of nihilism that renders both of them devoid of sense and

accounts for their 'decadence'. The key inspiration here is Guy Debord's famous theory of the 'society of the spectacle' (1994), which has been influential for the development of Agamben's thought since the late 1970s. For Debord, both totalitarian and democratic regimes were forms of what he called the spectacle, in which authentic existence is replaced by representation and the commodity-form colonizes social life as such. Socialist totalitarianism exemplified a 'concentrated' spectacle, in which the sphere of representation was controlled by the state apparatus, while liberal democracy exemplified a 'diffuse' spectacle, in which this control was disseminated throughout civil society. In his later *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* Debord (2011) introduced the third figure of the 'integrated spectacle', a post-Cold War synthesis of democratic and totalitarian forms that combines enhanced state control with the proliferation of 'private' production of representations (see Agamben 2000, 73-89).

This theory is important for understanding Agamben's pessimism about democracy at the very moment of its apparent triumph at the end of the Cold War. What some commentators viewed as the 'end of history', whereby democracy became the 'only game in town', having triumphed over its adversaries, was for Agamben the premonition of democracy's own decay.

The substantial unification of the concentrated spectacle (the Eastern people's democracies) and of the diffused spectacle (the Western democracies) into an integrated spectacle is, by now, trivial evidence. The immovable walls and the iron curtains that divided the two worlds were wiped out in a few days. The Eastern governments allowed the Leninist party to fall so that the integrated spectacle could be completely realized in their countries. In the same way, the West had already renounced a while ago the balance of powers as well as real freedom of thought and communication in the name of the electoral machine of majority vote and of media control over public opinion, both of which had developed within the totalitarian modern states. (Agamben 2000, 81)

If the political history of modernity is approached in terms of the convergence of liberal democracy and totalitarianism in the form of the integrated spectacle of the global police state, then the phenomenon of Soviet socialism may be retroactively devalued as ultimately little more than a step in this abysmal process. Writing in the early 1990s, when the communist ideal and practice were utterly discredited, Agamben understandably found little of interest in it other than as a transitional stage towards the synthetic version of the spectacle that makes the formerly 'hidden' solidarity between totalitarianism and democracy entirely manifest. As a form of totalitarianism, Stalinism both shares with democracy its biopolitical grounding and gradually converges with it as a result of its own and democracy's degeneration under the condition of nihilism.

From this perspective, Agamben's subsumption of Stalinism under totalitarianism, which is in turn subsumed under the Western ontopolitical tradition is understandable. And yet, there arises a question of whether the Stalinist case might not have offered Agamben a better paradigm of what he intended to demonstrate with the example of the Nazi camp as the paradigmatic nomos of modernity (1998, 166-180). In fact, the Stalinist camps of the late 1920-early 1930s function much better as the paradigms of the state of exception becoming the rule, precisely insofar as there was little that was actually *exceptional* in their operation. While the concentration camps established by the Spanish in Cuba or the British in South Africa as well as the Nazi death camps were clearly exceptional (in relation to a well-defined norm in liberal regimes or eventually eclipsing the norm

itself in the Nazi case), the Soviet camp of the period of the Great Break was, in a strict sense, the paradigm of the norm itself rather than an exception in any sense of the word (Arendt 1973, 287-288, 434-459; Losurdo 2011, 114-115). This is why the Gulag was never concealed by the regime until the Great Purges of 1937-1939 but, on the contrary, was publicized incessantly as the site of the 'reforging' of human beings into 'new Soviet persons', which was indeed the essence of the socialist project.

If the Nazi camps were genuinely *different* from the rest of society and ending up in one of them certainly entailed a drastic change in one's way of life, then the Soviet society under early Stalinism must be grasped as simply a zero-degree camp, in which the very same process of reforging unfolded with a lesser intensity, milder violence or looser control. For this reason, Stalinism best illustrates the tendency towards the integrated spectacle that Agamben laments, which does not consist in the mere proliferation of exceptional spaces, in which one is exposed to governmental violence, but rather in the disappearance of the very differences between the exceptional and the normal, when there is no longer any possibility of 'perpetual flight' or 'foreign land' to escape to, when escape is meaningless since one only flees *into* another version of the camp (see Agamben 1998, 183). Agamben's gloomy premonition of the destiny of global biopolitics is more understandable in terms of the universalization of the Gulag rather than of Auschwitz.

Esposito on Totalitarianism and Biopolitics

Roberto Esposito's theory of biopolitics, developed in his *Communitas – Immunitas – Bios* trilogy (2008a, 2010, 2011) and other works, follows Agamben in interpreting biopolitics in ontological terms, tracing its thanatopolitical turn to the immunitary logic of the protection of life by negative means. While Esposito's main works barely mention the socialist case and instead focus on Nazism as the extreme point of the immunitary-biopolitical tendencies of the Western tradition, in his article 'Totalitarianism or Biopolitics?' (2008b) Esposito addresses socialism at length in his comparison of totalitarianism and biopolitics as two hermeneutic paradigms for understanding 20th century politics. He reads theories of totalitarianism, from Arendt to Talmon and Furet, as problematic attempts to identify the origins of the catastrophes of the 20th century. Arendt (1973) finds these origins in the decline of the Greek polis and the ensuing depoliticization throughout the history of Western civilization, which took a particularly intense and lethal form with the late 19th century crisis of the nation-state, the emergence of imperialism and the appearance of racism as a political force. In contrast, Talmon (1970) finds the origins of totalitarianism in the egalitarian excesses of democracy that give rise to formerly unseen forms of despotism (Esposito 2008b, 636-638). According to Esposito, both of these theories fail to provide a coherent account of a single origin (or set thereof) of the two distinct phenomena of Nazism and Stalinism that they subsume under the notion of totalitarianism.

Arendt's analysis traces the genealogy of Nazism in 19th century European anti-Semitism, early 20th century imperialism and colonial administration and the post-World War I decline of the nation-state. Yet, while it is certainly plausible in the case of Nazism and other European fascisms, this account is difficult to apply to the Soviet case, since anti-Semitism and imperialism did not play the same role in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russia as they did in Central Europe. Moreover, Esposito plausibly wonders 'how [we] are to hold together in a single categorical horizon a

hypernaturalistic conception such as that of Nazism with the historicist paroxysm of communism. From a philosophical point of view, what does a theory of absolute equality—which is what communism at least in its principles purports to be—have to do with a theory and indeed a practice of absolute difference such as found in Nazism?’ (ibid., 637)? While in the famous concluding chapter of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, entitled ‘Ideology and Terror’, Arendt does indeed attempt to hold the two together by subsuming racist naturalism and class historicism under her notion of the totalitarian ideology, the discussion of the origins of totalitarianism in the preceding parts of the book only seems to explain recourse to Nazi hypernaturalism and not Bolshevik historicism. Thus, Arendt’s account of the origins of totalitarianism works much better as the genealogy of Nazism alone and, as Domenico Losurdo argued, the elements of this genealogy (e.g. racism, eugenics, imperialism, concentration camps, etc.) have a lot more in common with British and American liberalism than with Soviet Russia (Losurdo 2004, 38-41).

On the other hand, the theories that find the origins of totalitarianism in the alleged egalitarian excess of democracy that leads it to self-destruction have trouble subsuming under this scheme the experience of Nazism, which was hardly ever marked by the affirmation of egalitarianism. ‘The totalitarian regime doesn’t arise out of a defect but rather from an excess, a surplus, of democracy, from a democracy so radical, so extreme and absolute, and so full of egalitarianism as to break down its own formal limits and so to collapse on itself, turning into its opposite.’ (Esposito 2008b, 638) Yet, if it is the egalitarian legacy of the French Revolution that somehow generates totalitarianism as an immanent perversion of democracy, then Nazism would clearly not belong to this genealogy and hence should not be counted as ‘totalitarian’. Moreover, by positing totalitarianism as somehow immanent to democracy as its dream (equality) turning into its nightmare (the camp) (Esposito 2008b, 638), these authors unwittingly undermine the very opposition between democracy and totalitarianism that permitted grouping together Nazism and communism in the first place. If ‘communism is both democracy’s dream and its nightmare’ (ibid.), then its relation to it is much more complex than a frontal antagonism that characterizes the relation of Nazism to democracy.

Dismissing both versions of the theory of totalitarianism as incoherent, Esposito then turns to biopolitics. Whereas the former approach remained tied to a unified interpretation of the history of modernity (i.e. as the grand conflict between democracy and totalitarianism), the theory of biopolitics traces a radical disruption within history that takes place when life as such ‘bursts into politics, thereby breaking apart its presumed autonomy, shifting discourse onto a terrain that is irreducible to traditional terms like democracy, power and ideology’ (ibid., 639). This disruption permits Esposito to rigorously distinguish Nazism from communism: ‘[Nazism] isn’t an ideology because it belongs to a dimension that is different from and subordinate to that of ideas, from which Marxist communism was born. Nazism isn’t a markedly different species within the same genus, because it is situated outside Western tradition (a tradition that also includes the philosophy of communism among its offspring). Nazism isn’t a political philosophy but a political biology, a politics of life and politics over life transformed into its opposite and for that very reason productive of death.’ (Ibid., 640) While the antagonism between e.g. liberalism and socialism pertains to and unfolds in the realm of ideas that *mediate* the access of power to life as such, Nazism is ‘immediately biological’ and it is this singularity of Nazism that renders the category of totalitarianism inoperative (ibid., 641). The difference between Nazism and communism is not merely a difference between two ideologies but a difference between an ideology and a biology, i.e. between things so incommensurable that they cannot be subsumed under a single concept.

Moreover, the attention to the biopolitical character of liberalism entails that the category of 'liberal democracy', conventionally used as the *antithesis* of totalitarianism, also becomes inoperative, insofar as the universalist and egalitarian connotations of democracy clearly conflict with the particularistic and naturalistic logic of liberal biopolitics.

[When] the living or dying body becomes the symbolic and material epicentre of the dynamics of politics as well as its conflicts, we move into a dimension that lies not simply after or beyond democracy but resolutely outside it. Democracy is always directed to a totality of equal subjects, given the fact that they are separated from their own bodies and therefore understood as pure logical atoms endowed with rational will. This is why the onset of life into *dispositifs* of power marks the eclipse of democracy. (Ibid., 643-644)

Thus, Esposito supplants the very opposition between democracy and totalitarianism by the dualism of democracy (which now includes communism as the 'paroxysmal fulfilment' (ibid., 642) of the egalitarian promise) and biopolitics, which in turn is split between its *statist* form in Nazism and the *individualist* form in liberalism. The most fundamental political question of our time is then not the struggle between liberal democracy and left or right totalitarianism but between the egalitarian aspirations of democracy that constructs its subjects as 'disembodied subjectivities' and the biopolitical rationality of government that restores the 'bodily dimension' as at once 'subject and object' of politics (ibid., 643).

Yet, even if we grant that the antagonism between biopolitics and democracy is indeed the definitive conflict of late modernity, where does socialism fit in this dualism? Surely, it cannot be placed on the side of democracy, particularly in Esposito's own definition of it, given the abundance of historical evidence of downgrading of 'disembodied subjectivity', be it legal or moral, in Soviet politics and the exercise of power directly and immediately on the 'bodily dimension', be it in military parades, shock labour campaigns, the Gulag camps or the NKVD torture chambers. Yet, it is also impossible to place it on the side of biopolitics, as Esposito defines it, since it is heterogeneous both to the individualist biopolitics of liberalism (due to its suppression of individualism) and the statist biopolitics of Nazism (due to its heterogeneity to the latter's racism and biologism). While in the dualism of democracy and totalitarianism Soviet socialism was illegitimately lumped together with Nazism, in the new dualism of democracy and biopolitics we at best end up repeating this gesture, whereby socialism becomes a metaphorical version of Nazi racism, and at worst lose sight of Stalinism altogether, since it becomes unsubsumable under either of the two categories. Just as the Cold War opposition of democracy and totalitarianism lacked logical coherence by permanently producing a remainder that could not be incorporated into it, the new dualism of democracy and biopolitics leaves a remainder of its own, a regime that is apparently neither democratic nor biopolitical.

Conclusion

Thus, contemporary theories of biopolitics follow Foucault's inaugural move of the elision of the question of socialist biopolitics. Socialism is always already subsumed, either together with Nazism as the totalitarian version of racist biopolitical rationality, or together with Western biopolitics as such as the hyperbolic paradigm of its degradation, or simply disappears as somehow not properly biopolitical at all. And yet, this subsumption is highly problematic. The experience of Soviet

socialism was strongly heterogeneous to the naturalist governmentalities that characterized, in different ways, both liberalism and Nazism. In contrast to the immunitary orientation of these governmentalities, which sought to protect life from itself and thereby exposed it to death, socialism focused on life as an object of transformation rather than protection. Its recourse to extreme violence is therefore inexplicable in terms of the excess of protection but rather arises from the withdrawal of all protection in the first place, the exposure of the forms of life already deemed obsolete and dying in the name of the new, true, better forms of life to be constructed (Prozorov 2013).

While the paroxysms of Western biopolitics teach us an important lesson about the perils of politicized naturalism, the socialist case leads to the problematization of political constructivism, the disposition that approaches forms of life as constructible effects of wilful actions. In his *Opus Dei*, Agamben traces the genealogy of this disposition to the Christian liturgy, from which it became generalized as the ontology of effectiveness: 'Being and acting today have for us no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective and as such governable and efficacious, is real: this is the extent to which office, under the guise of the humble functionary or the glorious priest, has changed from top to bottom the rules of first philosophy as much as those of ethics.' (2013, xiii) In the biopolitical context, this ontology leads to the understanding of politics as what must be lived, actualized in positive forms of life constructed in governmental projects. In its quest to translate communist ideology into lived reality Soviet socialism was a particularly extreme version of this logic, yet it remains operative in the regimes whose governmental rationality is furthest away from socialism, e.g. the neoliberal restructuring of various social domains in accordance with economic rationality. This is why socialism cannot be subsumed under the naturalist orientations of Western biopolitics but rather remains the prime site for a critical engagement with biopolitical constructivism.

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